

Successful Teen Driving Performance Requires a System

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There is no question about the many research findings that state “Driver Education is broken and must be fixed”. What is “driver education” and what is “driver training” has many variations in both outcomes and descriptions. Typically, “education” is associated with classroom learning, and “training” is identified with in-car instruction. Suppose we eliminated both names and referred to a new program as Driver Risk Reduction?

We need “education” to learn a concept, to learn how to perform a behavioral pattern with the least amount of risk exposure. We need “education” to help acquire information that will shape the attitudes and values that will guide the actions we take as drivers. We need “training” to implement the concepts, the techniques, the values, and the processes that were learned.

Education is the blueprint that provides the foundation upon which training must build. Training is the structuring of one activity upon another, each giving more experience of the known and exploring and applying the same techniques to new situations.

There must be very little time lapse between the educational experience and its implementation into the training environment. And, of course the expected behavioral outcomes learned in the classroom must be the same as those practiced during the in-car training.

We must give correct practice of the appropriate techniques. The technique used is more important than the outcomes. And, the students must know when a technique is properly or improperly used.

A non-driving example of using a technique correctly or incorrectly can be applied to use of a computer keyboard. Place your hands on an imaginary keyboard and type the word “the”. Do it again. Hold up the fingers that you used to type the word “the”. If you were taught the “home row key system” you used two fingers from your left hand and one finger from your right hand. If you used a “hunt and peck” system you may have used one finger from each hand, or merely one finger. If we are only concerned with the outcome of the process, rather than the technique used, either system would give a correct result. But, if we evaluate which method will make the best use of the human-machine environment, then use of the “home row key system”, once practiced into habit, will serve the individual better for the remainder of one’s life. With the proper repetitions the fingers will move automatically onto the correct keys merely by looking at the letter. And, if one learned the use of the correct fingers for typing a “t”, an “h” and an “e” they will be able to use exactly the same technique to type 2,892 other words that contain a “t”, “h”, or “e”.

The question we need to ask is do we want the teen to learn the hunt and peck system or do we want them to learn the home row key system? And, if they learn the home row key system in the classroom, would we want the in-car instructor or the parent to give them practice in the hunt and peck system, or practice in the home row key system?

So, in driving, the “home row key system” is to teach drivers a system of how to FIND, SOLVE and CONTROL hazards that affect the path they intend the vehicle to travel. And, to have them know without thought, the exact course of action to take to have the potential hazard turn into a non-event.

Before we can determine if a driver is performing successfully, we need to define what constitutes the best behavior for the situation. We need to have clearly defined outcomes for what actions are acceptable to best reduce the actual or potential risk that the vehicle is subjected to.

To summarize: We need a system of driving that has clearly defined outcomes for driver risk-reduction performance. We need classroom activities that prepare the teen to have success in understanding and using the key behavioral outcomes. We need coaches in the vehicle to help teens achieve successful performance of the key behaviors. We need informed parents that will give the teen opportunity to practice one behavioral pattern at a time until they run smoothly together by habit. And, finally, we need a driver licensing exam that is testing the teens for the same outcomes.